

***Joint Statement on
the Impact of Entertainment Violence on Children
Congressional Public Health Summit
July 26, 2000***

We, the undersigned, represent the public health community. As with any community, there exists a diversity of viewpoints – but with many matters, there is also consensus. Although a wide variety of viewpoints on the import and impact of entertainment violence on children may exist outside the public health community, within it, there is a strong consensus on many of the effects on children's health, well-being and development.

Television, movies, music, and interactive games are powerful learning tools, and highly influential media. The average American child spends as much as 28 hours a week watching television, and typically at least an hour a day playing video games or surfing the Internet. Several more hours each week are spent watching movies and videos, and listening to music. These media can, and often are, used to instruct, encourage, and even inspire. But when these entertainment media showcase violence – and particularly in a context which glamorizes or trivializes it – the lessons learned can be destructive.

There are some in the entertainment industry who maintain that 1) violent programming is harmless because no studies exist that prove a connection between violent entertainment and aggressive behavior in children, and 2) young people know that television, movies, and video games are simply fantasy. Unfortunately, they are wrong on both counts.

At this time, well over 1000 studies – including reports from the Surgeon General's office, the National Institute of Mental Health, and numerous studies conducted by leading figures within our medical and public health organizations -- our own members – point overwhelmingly to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in some children. The conclusion of the public health community, based on over 30 years of research, is that viewing entertainment violence can lead to increases in aggressive attitudes, values and behavior, particularly in children.

Its effects are measurable and long-lasting. Moreover, prolonged viewing of media violence can lead to emotional desensitization toward violence in real life.

The effect of entertainment violence on children is complex and variable. Some children will be affected more than others. But while duration, intensity, and extent of the impact may vary, there are several measurable negative effects of children's exposure to violent entertainment. These effects take several forms.

- Children who see a lot of violence are more likely to view violence as an effective way of

settling conflicts. Children exposed to violence are more likely to assume that acts of violence are acceptable behavior.

- Viewing violence can lead to emotional desensitization towards violence in real life. It can decrease the likelihood that one will take action on behalf of a victim when violence occurs.
- Entertainment violence feeds a perception that the world is a violent and mean place. Viewing violence increases fear of becoming a victim of violence, with a resultant increase in self-protective behaviors and a mistrust of others.
- Viewing violence may lead to real life violence. Children exposed to violent programming at a young age have a higher tendency for violent and aggressive behavior later in life than children who are not so exposed.

Although less research has been done on the impact of violent interactive entertainment (video games and other interactive media) on young people, preliminary studies indicate that the negative impact may be significantly more severe than that wrought by television, movies, or music. More study is needed in this area, and we urge that resources and attention be directed to this field.

We in no way mean to imply that entertainment violence is the sole, or even necessarily the most important factor contributing to youth aggression, anti-social attitudes, and violence. Family breakdown, peer influences, the availability of weapons, and numerous other factors may all contribute to these problems. Nor are we advocating restrictions on creative activity. The purpose of this document is descriptive, not prescriptive: we seek to lay out a clear picture of the pathological effects of entertainment violence. But we do hope that by articulating and releasing the consensus of the public health community, we may encourage greater public and parental awareness of the harms of violent entertainment, and encourage a more honest dialogue about what can be done to enhance the health and well-being of America's children.

Donald E. Cook, MD
President
American Academy of Pediatrics

L. Michael Honaker, Ph.D.
Deputy Chief Executive Officer
American Psychological Association

Clarice Kestenbaum, MD
President
American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry

Dr. E. Ratcliffe Anderson, Jr. MD
Executive Vice President
American Medical Association